Bird Alliance
Central New Mexico
A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2026

A *Way Way Way* Wayward Seabird Drives Central New Mexico Birders South!

By Asher Gorbet

When news broke of a South Polar Skua at a high elevation lake outside of Ruidoso, New Mexico in the Sierra Blanca Mountains of Lincoln County on August 16, 2026, I was fully stunned by the news. Could it be true? My mind immediately flashed back to the last inland U.S. record I recalled for the species—a bird that showed up at a lake in the Oklahoma City metropolis in August 2013. This species, a large raptor-like seabird in the family *Stercorariidae*, has precious few inland records, as one might suspect.



The South Polar Skua at Grindstone Lake. Photo by Asher Gorbet.

Numerous birders followed up on an initial report on Reddit and were rewarded with observations, photographs, and even recordings to document New Mexico's first South Polar Skua.

During the course of the past few months, the bird has continued (as of October 15) and about 250 birders have submitted eBird observations on almost a daily basis since its discovery.

On the morning of August 25, Perrianne Houghton, the American Birding Association's Michael Retter, and I loaded into Lee Hopwood's truck and rumbled down to Ruidoso on a gorgeous late summer morning.

When the bird didn't immediately greet us upon our arrival, I felt a twinge of uncertainty as to whether we would see the special visitor. A short walk toward the west end of the lake, however, rewarded us with excellent views of a bird I had only previously seen in its primary habitat—deep

open ocean waters. Perrianne noted that the last time she had seen South Polar Skua was while she was actually very close to the South Pole in Antarctica!

The contrast between these two water and icescapes we were conjuring were a far cry from the picturesque alpine fishing lake surrounded by ponderosa pine trees where we found ourselves. During the course of our observation, we saw the bird swim and take a few short flights, but observed no foraging or feeding behavior. We were wowed by how close the bird came to us as we stood on the shore snapping photos while the bird lazily swam past us. At one point, I actually had to zoom out. Michael and I laughed that the next time either of us would photograph the species it would probably be from the deck of a wave-tossed boat instead of from dry land!

Beside the bird, we birders also seemed a bit out of place at Grindstone Lake, which seems to host far more anglers than birders. We talked with everyone who passed by about this special bird and Lee had folks peer through her scope to get a better look at this rare wonder of a bird. We weren't the only ones amazed by the presence of this special bird.

The answer, of course, is that we don't know! Sometimes, despite all the knowledge and understanding we have built up of these creatures, a few defy all norms and do their own thing.

Which begs the question… why here? This bird makes for only the third inland record for South Polar Skua west of the Mississippi River reported in eBird. Combined with only four additional inland records from the eastern U.S.—at least a few of which were documented during the Atlantic hurricane season and may have been weather influenced—we are left with remarkably few inland records for the species. And beyond these now seven U.S. records, no other inland records exist anywhere! This species, recorded on every continent on Earth, occurs only in open water and coastal environs, save these few errant birds.

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The Sungrebe (November 2008) and Rufous-necked Wood-Rail (July 2013) that showed up at Bosque del Apache and represented first and only records for the U.S. are two other birds that fit this odd mold and each of them left the collective birding world scratching our heads. I dare say this is one of the most exciting aspects of being a birder—the idea that whenever we go out birding, we could discover something truly extraordinary. For me, that always feels especially true in the Land of Enchantment.



Asher with Michael (right) snapped this celebratory selfie as the bird swam past!



BIRD ALLIANCE
Year-End
Partner Celebration
and Silent Auction

Join us for some fun as we celebrate another year of enjoying amazing birds and working with our friends to protect them! We have booked a private space and are very much looking forward to seeing you there!

LOCATION: 377 Brewery (and restaurant), 2027 Yale Blvd. SE Albuquerque (just north of Gibson)
DATE: Friday, December 5, 2026
TIME: 5:00-7:00 p.m.
FOOD & DRINK: You will be able to purchase dinner and beverages from the 377 Brewery menu. Family and friends are welcome.

PLEASE VISIT this special web page for more information about the party and auction.



The Bird Alliance of Central New Mexico is a not-for-profit chapter of the National Audubon Society. Its mission is to protect and conserve birds and wildlife habitats in our region, support responsible stewardship of land, promote environmental education, and welcome all communities to join us in the love and appreciation of birds.

For more information, please visit these websites:
Bird Alliance and National Audubon Society.

Birding Botswana and the Okavango Delta

Story and images by Russell Dawson

When you think of Botswana, you think of the Big Five (elephant, rhino, cape buffalo, lion, leopard, plus cheetah and giraffe). Birding can be exciting and could be dangerous if you bird like you would at home.

During our trip in August 2025, we first stopped in Livingstone, Zambia and Victoria Falls, with baboons and too many tourists, so very few birds. The trip really begins now with our drive through Namibia to our camp on the Zambezi River and our first sightings of African Sacred Ibis. Nesting Marabou Storks reside in the treetops along the river. No strolling looking for birds here because of the crocodiles and the elephants walking through the surrounding area. At night you fall asleep to male lions vocalizing.



Crested Barbet

Cruising on the river brings sightings of Wire-tailed Swallow, African Darter, White-faced Whistling-Duck, Egyptian Goose, four species of white egrets, hippos, gazelles, crocs, and, of course, monkeys. Around camp, the staff use slingshots to keep the monkeys from taking our food.

In the morning, we climbed back into our safari vehicle and visited rare white rhinos guarded 24 hours a day by men carrying well used AK-47s. That day we saw my favorite, the Gray Go-away-bird (named for its call). Other sightings were Southern Ground-Hornbill, Common Ostrich, Collared Pratincole, Crested Francolin, African Harrier-Hawk, African Scops Owl, African Barred Owlet, and many small birds including the Common Bulbul.



Southern Ground-Hornbill

We were not allowed to leave the vehicle outside of camp and in camp you needed an escort after dark. In at least two of the camps, we had various big cats and elephants walking through at night. After two days, we fly to the Chobe National Park area. From the airport, we rode in a safari

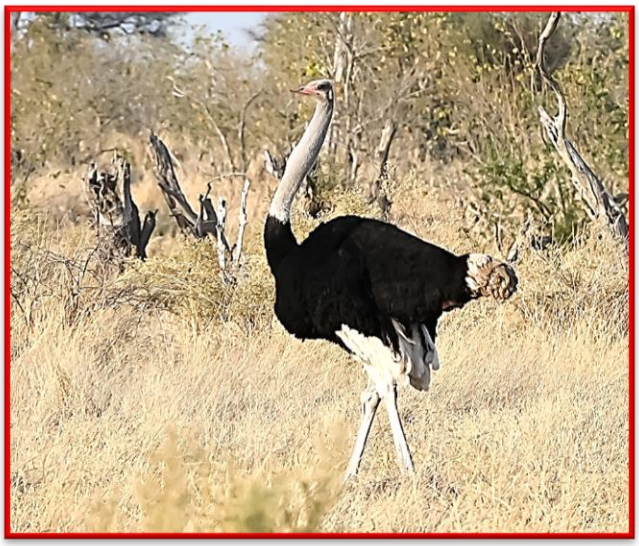
vehicle to our next camp with many frequent sightings of elephants, giraffes, and zebras. Birds sighted included: White-headed, Lappet-faced, Hooded vultures; as well as Coqui Francolin, Red-Eyed Dove, Namaqua Dove, Mourning Collared Dove, Little, White-fronted, and Olive bee-eaters along with African Darter, Reed Cormorant, Long-toed Lapwing, and many Hamerkop.

Next, we flew to Pelo camp in the heart of the Okavango. Here we boated and drove for three days. On the water we saw: Gray, Purple, Little and Squacco herons. Our most exciting event happened while shifting from boats to safari vehicles when a bull elephant faint-charged us for being too close to his family group. We saw Crested Barbet, Tawny Eagle and many Western and Eastern Cattle Egrets sitting on hippos and cape buffalo. Two of my favorite sightings were a Pink-backed Pelican and a Pied Kingfisher.



Lilac-breasted Roller

After the Delta, we flew to the Santawani Private Concession in the southern edge of the Delta. Camp had a waterhole where every type of beast drank depending on the time of day. The tree in the center had communal nests. We saw a mongolet (a group of mongooses), a pack of African wild dogs, giraffe, zebra, gazelle, but only heard the lions at night. Plus, hornbills (both Southern Red-billed and Southern Yellow-billed) and pairs of Bearded Woodpecker.



Common Ostrich

On our next to last day, we were still trying to find a cheetah. In the afternoon, we spotted a group of giraffes that kept looking back and that is when we spotted four cheetahs that were brothers. We followed them for hours and I didn't get to have a close look for birds. On our way to our final flight, I had a contest with the guide about how many giraffes we would see. The final count was a few more than 40. During this trip we identified 116 species of birds (adding 112 to my life list) out of a possible total of 377.

BIRD ALLIANCE SCHOLARSHIPS ARE AVAILABLE!

If you know of a young person between the age of 6 and 20 who has their heart set on a camp, program or course to learn about birds, wildlife or conservation, please guide them to the Ryan D. Beaulieu Youth Memorial Scholarship information on our website. They'll be glad you did!

THIS BIRD IS AN EVENING GROSBEAK

Compiled by Lefty Arnold

IS IT SEEN IN NEW MEXICO?

A review of eBird sightings of the Evening Grosbeak in New Mexico indicates that a birder in every one of the state's 33 counties has noted this species, most often seen in the northern part of the state. Have you seen one?



Lefty Arnold photographed this male Evening Grosbeak at the Randall Davey Audubon Center in Santa Fe.

About this bird (from All About Birds)

A heavyset finch of northern coniferous forests, the Evening Grosbeak adds a splash of color to winter bird feeders every few years, when large flocks depart their northern breeding grounds *en masse* to seek food to the south. The yellow-bodied, dusky-headed male has an imposing air thanks to his massive bill and fierce eyebrow stripe. The female is more subtly marked, with golden highlights on her soft gray plumage. This declining species is becoming uncommon, particularly in the eastern United States.

Find This Bird

It's hard to predict where in the western and northeastern U.S. Evening Grosbeaks will show up in any given winter. When they move into an area, they're very likely to show up at platform feeders offering sunflower seeds, particularly near forested areas at higher elevations. Out in the woods, you'll have better luck finding a flock if you listen for their running patter of call notes, which can be sweet, burry, or sharp. In summer you'll need to be in northern North America or in the mountains of the West, where Evening Grosbeaks breed in coniferous forests. At this time, they are harder to find as they forage and nest high in trees, travel in smaller groups, and make less noise.

Backyard Tips

Although they may not visit your backyard every year, Evening Grosbeaks show up irregularly at feeders during the winter. They eat sunflower seeds and are also attracted to the seeds, berries, and buds of trees and shrubs—especially maples. They are fairly large birds and they often travel in sizeable flocks, so they often use platform feeders as opposed to tube feeders. Find out more about what this bird likes to eat and which feeder is best by using the Project FeederWatch Common Feeder Birds bird list.

Cool Facts

❖ The Evening Grosbeak is a songbird without a song—that is, it does not seem to use any complex sounds to attract a mate or defend its territory. It does have a small repertoire of simple calls, including sweet, piercing notes and burry chirps.

❖ With their enormous bills, Evening Grosbeaks can crush seeds that are too large for Common Redpolls and Pine Siskins to open. These smaller birds often seek out the grosbeaks and glean the food scraps they leave behind.

❖ Though they're ferocious seed-crackers in the wintertime, in summer Evening Grosbeaks eat insects such as spruce budworm, a serious forest pest. The grosbeaks are so adept at finding these tiny caterpillars that the birds often provide a first warning that a budworm outbreak has begun.

❖ In the mid-1800s, Evening Grosbeaks were uncommon to rare east of the Rockies, but then they began moving eastward with each winter migration, reaching Rhode Island in the winter of 1910–1911. By the 1920s they were considered a regular winter visitor in New England. This eastward expansion may be related to the growing number of ornamental box elders, which provide a steady food supply for the grosbeaks.

❖ Evening Grosbeaks are irregular (or "irruptive") winter migrants. Some years these spectacular finches show up at feeders far south of their normal winter range—providing a treat for backyard bird watchers.

❖ The oldest recorded Evening Grosbeak was a male, and at least 16 years, 3 months old when he was found in New Brunswick in 1974. He was banded in Connecticut in 1959.

Belen Marsh Clean-up

By Eileen Beaulieu

On Saturday, September 19, the Bird Alliance of Central New Mexico and the Isleta Reach Stewardship Association cleaned the Belen Marsh. Six volunteers did a wonderful job cleaning this important habitat.



As you can see from the photos, the effort took a lot of work. We clean the marsh twice a year, usually in autumn and spring. Volunteers are provided with trash bags, safety vests, gloves, water and are rewarded with as many snacks as they want.

We extend our sincere thanks to all the wonderful volunteers.

← *Photo by Raymond Schaedler.*

Farewell and thank you to Jason Kitting!

For more than 10 years, Jason Kitting has been an integral part of our organization as a Board member and volunteer. But alas, he has flown the coop and established a new home in Nevada.



We greatly appreciate his work as a board member and subject matter expert on so many aspects of our mission. He generously shared his knowledge and experience as an ornithologist and researcher and made us more effective as bird and conservation advocates.

Although we will miss him, the good news is we can follow him on Instagram to continue to learn from him and enjoy his work: @birdbanderdude_nm.

We wish him well!

Two images from local birders/photographers Perianne Houghton and Tim Wallace

Tim's Western Bluebird shows the telltale rust on the male's back, while Perrianne's captures the yellow feathers atop the male American Three-toed Woodpecker.



Manzano Pond, June 2026.



Santa Fe Ski Area, July 2026